

Making the economy fit for family life: modern attacks on the family, and what can be done about them

by **Dr Richard House**

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‘When mothers are impoverished, children suffer’.
(Global Women’s Strike)

Introduction

I begin with some basic axioms. First, I take it that childcare and early education (EE) cannot be considered without factoring into the discussion the wider societal context of social and educational policy-making, fiscal (taxation) policy, and the quality of family life. Secondly, I take it that it is *our children* who will continue the species – hopefully in a better, more enlightened way than we adults have so far managed to. Next, the first ‘mark of maturity’ of any society is the way in which it treats and cares for its young and old people. I contend that there are some phenomena in human society that need to transcend free-market relations, and where the market should have no place. So-called ‘public goods’ constitute one such place, and how a society cares for its young children and old people should be another.

Next, it is *not* anti-feminist or somehow ‘anti-women’ to advocate the importance of family life and its stability for the well-being of young children. The *quality of early attachment relationships* is how children learn about love (both loving and allowing oneself to be loved), about human relationships, and about life itself. If we believe this, then presumably we also believe that it should be our task to maximise the quality of those early relationships – and the question then arises as to the best way of bringing this about. I return to this theme later.

British society is extremely unequal, according to just about any conceivable measure – and this structural inequality has a massive impact on the life chances and experiences of children – who (most people believe) have no choice in the families into which they are born. But does such inequality matter? – this is a serious question. If we say ‘no’, we would need to justify this position; and if we say ‘yes, such structural inequalities do matter’ (as I think most people would), then the next question is, what is society going to do about this? – what is the range of possibilities?

Economy-centric policy recommendations for early childhood

With the Confederation of British Industry now joining the cacophony of establishment voices advocating universal childcare availability at younger and younger ages, adding to Chancellor George Osborne's drive to get half a million stay-at-home mothers back to work by 2016 (*Daily Telegraph*, 22 October), there are comparatively few organisations and individuals left which are challenging this childcare ideology. My core thesis in this talk is that, in England at least, policy making for young children is driven far more by the flawed individual psychologies of our policy-makers and by the needs of the neoliberal economy, than it is by children's, parents' or families' well-being.

In stark contrast, some 18 months ago, the Global Women's Strike (GWS) movement issued a petition, in which they demand that:

1. **Caring is recognised as vital work for the whole society; and**
2. **All carers, including mothers, are paid a living wage for this indispensable work, including paid time off.**

This latter proposal could scarcely be more different from that of the CBI and the main political parties' unseemly 'Dutch auction' on childcare. In Global Women's Strike's petition preamble, we read that '*Mothers are the primary carers everywhere in the world*', and that '*Carers are impoverished. Income Support is being abolished. Child Benefit, society's commitment to children, is no longer universal. Carer's Allowance is insultingly low and most carers don't even qualify.*' Moreover, '*Mothers are told they are "workless", with earning being more important than caring. Clients are pushed into jobs regardless of hours, pay or childcare provision.*' And we read further than '*Having to fit caring around jobs results in overwork, exhaustion and ill-health.*'

Three propositions are advanced here to throw light on what is happening to family life under our current economic system. I will draw substantially on Sue Gerhardt's recent book, *The Selfish Society: How We All Forgot To Love One Another and Made Money Instead* (Simon & Schuster, 2010; the first edition of Gerhardt's classic book *Why Love Matters* was published 6 years earlier, in 2004).

Proposition 1: Employers disown any responsibility for the quality of family life

Gerhardt writes: 'Historically, employers have never acknowledged that the working conditions they offered have affected the family and they have never taken any responsibility for their impact on the family' (p. 327). Gerhardt adds further that 'we could demand that employers must now use some of their profits to contribute to the social costs of employing parents of young children' (ibid.) Put somewhat differently, we can say that the demanding of time and resources for caring has the intention of making economic and social policies serve the needs of people, thus heralding a move away from what is seen as 'the uncaring market' in the sphere of the family.

Note also that the CBI's recent advocacy of earlier universal childcare doesn't begin to respond adequately to the malaise of modern family life in advanced capitalism.

Proposition 2: Young children are being forced into growing up too quickly

A further proposition concerns the related issue of children growing up too quickly in modern society – indeed, this can be seen as a direct consequence of the way in which the culturally embedded lives of families are subject to the vicissitudes of the economic system. Sue Gerhardt again: 'there seems to be an urgency about growing up fast – so as to be as little trouble to your carers as possible'. Gerhardt makes the even bolder claim that 'The drive for everyone to be *economically* self-sufficient has pushed us into an expectation that everyone should be *emotionally* self-sufficient – even babies' (p. 203, her italics). In other words, the claim is that the ideological neoliberal imperative that demands economic self-sufficiency and independence generates a similar dynamic in the emotional development of young children, with time at a premium and children's early lives being cast in the image of the market.

Proposition 3: The collusive role of the policy-maker

A third proposition concerns the role that policy makers are taking – or not taking – in the rapidly deteriorating quality of modern family life. Gerhardt again: '...politicians are limited by their own emotional and moral development... [because of which] it becomes difficult to entrust them with "parenting" the nation-state on our behalf' (p. 253). What Gerhardt is saying here is that our largely public-school educated policy-making elite tend to have disturbed early attachment issues from early childhood, which at the time typically provoked premature development and an intellectual precocity that render them unable to make emotionally intelligent and developmentally appropriate policy-making decisions about children and family life.

The recent book by Nick Duffell, *Wounded Leaders*, makes the same essential point. For Duffell, in a book which is already causing quite a stir, he radically questions the impact of the public schooling system on children's character development, highlighting the effect of an emotionally deprived background on Britain's current political leaders. The British public school elite are typically severed from normal family life at a young age, and as institutionalised children they learn a harsh lesson – viz. that their survival depends on the ruthless repression of their feelings. When in positions of political power, this elite then looks after its own class, and it rationalises the impact on the rest of us, unconsciously seeing the world through lenses that are clouded by their own early experience – i.e. *Deprivation is good for you!* Sue Gerhardt agrees: 'the people who lead the banks, governments or corporations bring their psychological attitudes and values to their public tasks. They shape the culture in their own image, often demonstrating the same problems in facing difficult realities as do narcissistic individuals.' (p. 45).

Some Implications

One key implication of the arguments presented here is that both the political left *and* the political right have a lot to answer for: in the case of the latter, what is

promoted is free-market capitalism, materialism, acquisitiveness, individualism, narcissism, the commodification of caring, and an *anti*-dependency mentality... – which, *in extremis*, can lead to the view that ‘There is no such thing as society’. While on the political left, we see a predominance of atheism and secularism, and associated ‘political correctness’; versions of philosophical realism and materialism (e.g. see Marxism); and the creeping ‘nationalisation’ of childhood/family life, and the associated demise of the family as an institution for ‘holding’ the healthy development of the next generation (cf. how often the political left denigrates the traditional family configuration). So in terms of the quality of family life, there exists a compelling case for casting a plague on the houses of both the Right *and* the Left.

It was Christopher Lasch who, in 1979, first coined the now iconic phrase ‘the culture of narcissism’ in his book of the same title; psychologists Wallach and Wallach then picked up the torch soon afterwards with their little known but important book *Psychology’s Sanction for Selfishness*; and an increasing number of commentators have been picking up on this theme, including Sue Gerhardt, Twenge and Campbell’s *The Narcissism Epidemic* (The Free Press, 2009), and a number of psychoanalytic theorists. Sue Gerhardt’s key point is that many of the problems in present-day society stem from our child-rearing practices. One can also argue that going hand in hand with the rise of narcissistic materialism and consumerism has gone the demise of any *spiritual* dimension in relation to early childhood experience, with materialism and acquisitiveness increasingly trumping, and even obliterating, love and caring.

I posed the question earlier as to what options we possess for responding to the current malaise of family life and early childhood experience. There exist a number of possibilities.

(1) We could address head-on the distribution of income and wealth, and the power differentials in society. The only problem here is that political leaders of every main political party have shown no appetite whatsoever for addressing this issue – it seems that the neoliberal economic system is sacrosanct, and its highly perverse distributional outcomes cannot be tampered with to any significant extent.

(2) We could focus massive resources on helping build local communities (as they say, ‘It takes a village to raise a child’) – but with over 600 Sure Start centres having been closed since 2010, this also seems a remote possibility.

(3) Thirdly – and this *does* seem to be the current policy – we could focus massive resources on early education, in an attempt to load all responsibility for addressing the huge inequalities in early life-chances on to the ‘nappy curriculum’. But not only can early education not begin to address what are *structurally* generated inequalities, but the accompanying ‘schoolifying’ agenda has all manner of well-documented toxic sequelae. And when we add to this the elephant in the room that is England’s unconscionably early school-starting age, then we can really see how the ‘schoolification’ of early childhood, with its age-inappropriate early learning, might well map very elegantly on to the ‘wounded healer’ histories of our policy-makers, referred to above.

Another elephant in the room here might be whether those who are in a privileged economic position *really* want the life chances of children from lower stations in life to improve – because if one answers ‘yes’ to this question, it will almost certainly mean that *one’s own* children will end up being worse off in this ‘zero-sum’ world. Are those who currently possess disproportionate economic and political genuinely prepared to countenance this equalising possibility? – because if they aren’t, then I submit that any superficial, rhetorical claims to support the enhancing of the life chances of more deprived children is little more than meaningless, strategically expedient froth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, just as we should make schools ready for children in all their rich diversity, rather than making children ready for school, using same logic, I maintain that *we should be making the economy ready for children and families* (whatever this takes), rather than making families fit into the demands of the economic system (whatever the cost). And in order to bring this about, top-down political change seems the least likely approach that will bear fruit. What we therefore need is a genuinely grass-roots, bottom-up social movement, mobilising in every possible way to halt and reverse the economic imperatives that are making it ever-more difficult for parents to live unhurried, high-quality lives in their young children’s early years.

More specifically, I have forayed into the controversial question of the ‘mass psychology’ of government policy makers, and why it might be that family and childcare policy-making seems to be so thoroughly ideological in nature, and seems to cut across class and party-political divides to create a particularly toxic kind of consensus. On this view, we need to begin to look at the *individual psychological histories* of policy-makers (another example of which is Leo Abse’s dissection of the formative traumata in Tony Blair’s life – see *Tony Blair: The Man Who Lost His Smile*, Robson Books, 2003), seeking out what it might be about those early histories that is generating such objectionable policy-making outcomes. The theme I have mentioned above has been that of the English public school system, the way in which early attachment experiences are typically disrupted in that system, and the way in which this can influence the belief systems and behaviour of those subjected to it. While this explanation may well successfully account for some of the observed variance in policy-makers’ attitudes to these issues, it is almost certainly not enough, and we will need complementary *structural-level* explanations as well, which focus on the compelling logic of the neoliberal economic system and how it coerces certain attitudes and beliefs (and silences other, more beneficent possibilities), that seem to cut right across the normal party-political divides. Though suggestive and persuasive, the overall argument developed here clearly needs far more filling out than I’ve been able to achieve in this short address.

So just to return again to why this is so important, I’ll end with some quotations from the admirable Global Women’s Strike. Asking for ‘a living wage for mothers and other carers’, they argue that ‘Having to fit caring around jobs results in overwork, exhaustion and ill-health... When caring work is devalued, people, relationships and

life itself are devalued. The result is inequity and social neglect.' We urgently need to understand just how it is that the current system seems to be so wilfully blind to these crucial questions.

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